

*Famous Last Words*

Rev. Gary Kowalski

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Last words have a special power and poignancy. The situation is charged with drama. On the very brink of death, there arises one final opportunity to muse about the meaning of it all. The actor prepares to make a final soliloquy upon the stage, and writers have exploited the inherently theatrical qualities of the dying utterance. Shakespeare's Caesar responds with bitterness as his former friend Brutus plunges a fatal dagger into his heaving chest: "Et tu, Brute!" In Charles Dickens's novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, the character Sidney bravely sacrifices his life for others, proclaiming as he ascends the steps toward the guillotine, "Tis a far, far better thing that I now do than I have ever done before." The reader who may have skimmed over whole sections of dialogue in the beginning or middle of the book pays close attention at the end. How will the hero or heroine fare as they approach the concluding chapter of life? What will they say at such a moment of gripping tension? For the ending is what gives significance and coherence to all that came before.

But famous last words of fictitious characters in literature pale when compared to those of personages from real life. There was the notorious Roman Emperor Nero, a megalomaniac to the last, who died with the lament: "What an artist the world is losing in me!" And every school child remembers the defiant speech of Captain Nathan Hale, the revolutionary patriot hanged by the British for espionage: "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country!" Fewer kids learn about that other American hero, Ethan Allen, who was told on his deathbed that the angels were waiting. "Let 'em wait, damn em!" came the old rascal's reply. Dying words have a capacity to throw both vice and virtue into bold relief. The way an individual faces death seems to illuminate how they faced life as well, with cowardice or courage, with faith or fear. Character is put under the magnifying glass.

Freeman Dyson, for instance, offers a simple story about his friend and mentor, the physicist Robert Oppenheimer, with whom he had briefly worked in Los Alamos on the Manhattan Project. Oppenheimer was known by those who worked in the laboratory for the strength of his personality and the unique style he brought to his science. But it was not until 1966, after Oppenheimer had been diagnosed with throat cancer, that Dyson saw the real greatness of the man. “The last time I saw him was in February 1967,” he says, “at a meeting of the faculty of the physics school at the institute. We met to decide upon the choice of visiting members for the following year. Each of us had to do a substantial amount of homework before the meeting, reading through a big brown box full of applications and judging their relative merits. Oppenheimer came to the meeting as usual, although he well knew that he would not be there to welcome the new members on their arrival. He could speak only with great difficulty, but he had done his homework and he remembered accurate the weak or strong points of the various candidates. The last words I heard him say were, ‘We should say yes to Weinstein. He is good.’ After this supreme effort of will, Robert Oppenheimer went home to his bed and collapsed into a sleep from which he never woke.” Dyson says the episode left him with the impression of “a man carrying a crushing burden and still doing his job with such style and good humor that all of us around him felt uplifted by his example.” Certainly the words themselves were not profound. They were simple, straightforward, workmanlike. But the context gave them emotional impact.

You might suppose that, as a minister, I am used to eavesdropping on the dying or listening to parting requests. But although I have spent time with people near the end of life, I don’t recall ever overhearing what could be called “last words.” I did, however, learn an interesting tale about Dorothea Merriman, the mother of one of my former parishioners who died some years ago. Dorothea was a member of King’s Chapel in Boston and of old New England stock. She was an early feminist who helped put the first women on the Board of Deacons in her church, and she remained active in social and political causes throughout her life. Shortly before her death in 1968, the Reverend Carl Scovel, who was then the minister at King’s Chapel, called on Mrs. Merriman to pay his last respects. As he prepared to say farewell, she had one final question for her

pastor—not of a spiritual or theological nature, however. “Did you vote for Hubert Humphrey?” she wanted to know. Learning that he had indeed cast his ballot Democratic, the elderly woman was presumably able to lay down with her heart at rest.

It stands to reason that people who know they are near the end of life feel free to speak with greater honesty and integrity than others. Inhibitions and phoniness fall away. There is no attempt to impress one’s listeners, and little motive to dissemble or deceive. And in fact, this assumption about the veracity of deathbed confessions is embodied in the common law. Rules of evidence ordinarily prohibit hearsay from being entered as testimony before a court. But an exception to the rules is made for statements that come from the deathbed. By their very nature, they are presumed more likely to be true than ordinary discourse. And as Henry Thoreau points out, any truth is better than make-believe. In *Walden*, he writes that “Tom Hyde, the tinker, standing on the gallows, was asked if he had anything to say. ‘Tell the tailor,’ said he, ‘to remember to make a knot in their thread before they take the first stitch.’ His companion’s prayer was forgotten, notes Thoreau. There’s no use in wasting your final breath on hot air or bombast and no time for idle chit chat. The urgency of the circumstances demands that we stay real and stick close to the point.

Sometimes last words are apocryphal or disputed. Some heard John Quincy Adams say “I am content” as he expired, for example. Others swore that he said, “I am composed.” And there is at least that much disagreement over the final words of Jesus. In Matthew and Mark, his closing cry upon the cross is a heart-rending recitation from the Psalms: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In Luke’s gospel, Jesus prays as he is being crucified, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” and ends on a note of acceptance and letting go, “Into thy hands I commend my spirit.” John concludes the earthly career of Jesus with the simple statement, “It is finished.” Scholars may never agree which if any of these versions are closest to the actual words of Jesus. The earliest source, Mark, was probably not written until forty years after Jesus had left this world and all the gospel renditions are influenced more by the hopes and needs of the early Christian community than by any concern for accuracy. But all

four gospels are alike in one important respect. All are essentially passion narratives, in which the death of Jesus is understood to be the climax or culminating point of his existence. Parting words and dying deeds do indeed carry a special weight. And all the gospels present an essentially believable picture of a man faced with a painful and ignominious death who is nonetheless able to express faith, forgiveness and fortitude at the last. While none of the gospel writers were historians or overly concerned with the factual record, probably none of them were deliberately fictionalizing or exaggerating events. For as we've seen, real life tends to be more startling than any work of the imagination.

It's not hard at all to think of Jesus crying out to God at the end, because others have done the same. On the thirtieth of January, 1948, Mohandas Gandhi was walking toward a crowd of followers to lead them in prayer when a Hindu nationalist named Nathuram Godse stepped before him and from a range of two feet fired three shots from a pistol. The smile faded from the Mahatma's face and his arms that had been raised in greeting and blessing to the crowd descended to his sides, as he exclaimed the single word Ram, which his biographer Louis Fischer translates, "Oh God!" For Gandhi, as for Jesus, it seems to have been a question as well as a prayer. "Can this really be happening?" and "Lord, wherever you are, be with me now." The words of Jesus stand out because they are one of the few phrases in the New Testament given in Aramaic rather than Greek, "*Eli, Eli Lama Sabachthani.*" And I can well imagine Jesus in his final throes turning for comfort to the twenty-second psalm, which begins in desperation, "My God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why are thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning," but which then moves on to affirm, "In thee our fathers trusted, and thou didst deliver them. To thee they cried, and were saved."

And what about Luke's version of events, where Jesus asks forgiveness for his executioners? It may or may not have happened just as the Bible describes, but I'm reminded of the example of the saintly and humane Sir Thomas More, who also died for his faith. The words More said on his way up the gallows, filled with self-mocking humor, seem to have been aimed at putting his own hangman at ease and helping him

less grim about the morbid business just ahead. “Help me up the stairs please,” Sir Thomas requested. “Coming down, I’ll shift for myself.” It’s not so farfetched to think that Jesus might also have sensed a shared humanity and felt compassion, even for the soldiers who drove the nails.

And consider what he said next: “Into thy hands I commend my spirit.” So many souls have left the world with that same sense of confidence and quiet trust. The Christian theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was put to death by the Nazis for his part in a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler, left us with the remark that “for others, this may be an end, but for me it’s just a beginning.” But I think my favorite quotation comes from the renowned American preacher of the nineteenth century, Henry Ward Beecher. As he readied himself for his final exit, he murmured the words, “And now, the mystery!” Imagine meeting the end of life, not with anxiety or dread, but with curiosity and anticipation. Beecher’s brief comment reveals wisdom and hope and courage. These were the parting words of an individual who had long reflected on matters of life and death and, without knowing all the answers, made his peace with the great unknown.

I hope that I might eventually leave the world with that kind of serenity and calm. I wish that I might have something equally generous and encouraging to say to whoever might be listening at the time. Yet realistically, few of us will have any opportunity for smooth speeches or fine phrases when the moment comes. Death more often catches us unawares, as it did Emilio Zapata, the famed Mexican revolutionary. Caught in an ambush by the federales, he lay bleeding in his comrades’ arms, his life draining away. “Tell them I said something,” he requested. In other words, make up some inspiring comments that will summarize the values I championed and the principles and I believed in and the things I fought for. Help those who follow to remember me, not for my frailties, but for my good intentions and better impulses. I suspect that many of us will arrive at the end of life wishing we had said something earlier, when we had the chance, when the people who mattered were there to hear us. Words like, “I love you. Thank you. I forgive you, and I’m sorry,” come immediately to mind. And because none

of us knows the time or manner of our own demise, the time for famous last words is now.

Aldous Huxley was asked very near the end of his life what he had learned from his long study of the world's religions. Huxley was the author of *The Perennial Philosophy*, a compendious survey of mysticism and spiritual insight, from St. John of the Cross to the Upanishads and the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Huxley knew his time was short, and I think he was speaking personally, aware of the need to make every word count, when he responded. "Try to be a little kinder," he said. He'd studied the teachers and sages of all traditions and that, in his opinion, pretty much summed it up. Be a little kinder, with others and with yourself.

Easter is an excellent time to consider what you need to say--to celebrate the universe, to give thanks for your birth, to show appreciation for your loved ones, and to express your belief that in spite of its brevity life remains infinitely worth living, bounded on all sides by mystery and wonder. May our words be words of praise: Amen and Alleluia, Glory Be and Blessed Be, this day and each day, from alpha to omega, first to last, now and at the end of time.